

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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***THE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF MAJOR GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN  
DURING THE PENINSULA CAMPAIGN***

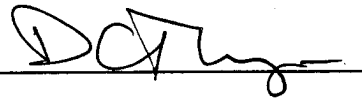
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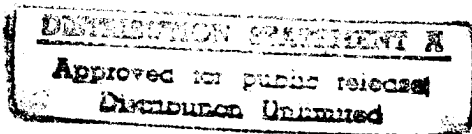
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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7 November 1997



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## **ABSTRACT**

Major General George B. McClellan's operational leadership during the Peninsula Campaign of 1862 is critically examined focusing on his relationship with President Lincoln and three key leadership traits- character, will, and boldness. McClellan intended to strike at Richmond, the Confederate capital and a major economic and transportation center, from the Union strongpoint at Fort Monroe by exploiting naval superiority to bypass enemy forces in northern Virginia. Though this campaign offered the Union a significant opportunity to deliver a decisive blow against the Confederacy, McClellan failed to do so despite enjoying many advantages.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana*

Clausewitz remarked that "in the art of war experience counts more than any amount of abstract truths."<sup>1</sup> But he also noted that the theory of war is meant "to guide the education of the future commander"<sup>2</sup> and that "historical examples clarify everything."<sup>3</sup> A key aspect of preparation for the next war is the study of past military campaigns. The campaigns of great captains have been closely scrutinized to ascertain the genesis of their operational successes and the relevance of these lessons to future conflicts. Though such analyses naturally focus on the victors, there is much to be gained from examining the actions of the losers. Mistakes often provide the most valuable lessons, and it is generally preferable to learn from the ones of others.

This paper will examine the operational leadership of Major General George B. McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, focusing on his relationship with President Lincoln and three key leadership traits- character, will, and boldness. Despite commanding a well-equipped, trained, and motivated army, and enjoying the support of a strong navy and a powerful economy, he failed to translate the battlefield successes of this campaign into the attainment of operational and strategic goals. A study of McClellan's leadership the Peninsula Campaign has merit for current American military leaders at the operational level. They too command well-equipped, highly trained, and disciplined forces supported by a sophisticated, potent economy. With the increased emphasis on winning quickly at minimum cost, the United States cannot afford to have its operational

commanders repeat McClellan's mistakes.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is generally defined as the art of influencing people to work toward the accomplishment of a common objective.<sup>4</sup> Military leadership at the operational level, the bridge between the strategic and tactical levels of war, is particularly crucial. Operational leadership is "that component of operational art that researches and studies all the aspects of the practical work of the commanders and staffs to translate national or theater-strategic aims and tasks into militarily attainable operational or strategic objectives."<sup>5</sup> To achieve this translation, a strong relationship between the operational commander and political leaders is paramount. The operational commander must thoroughly understand the policy and identify the risks associated with any strategy and resources mismatch.

Three traits in particular are essential for operational leaders: character; will; and boldness. Character is the foundation of a commander's tough-mindedness and self-confidence. It includes both moral and physical courage. Both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz agree that stability, self-control, and determination are indispensable.<sup>6</sup> To Clausewitz, the term *man of character* "can only be applied to those whose views are stable and constant."<sup>7</sup>

Clausewitz notes "war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."<sup>8</sup> The operational commander seeks to force the enemy to do his will through military action. The commander imposes his will on subordinate commanders by clearly articulating his intent and the desired effects of the action. The operational commander must ensure that

subordinates fully understand his intent and remain undeterred by uncertainty and friction to retain the initiative. Indecisiveness is the antithesis of strength of will.

Clausewitz and Sun Tzu believe that a commander's ability to manipulate risk and exploit opportunities is the most critical test of military leadership, although "Clausewitz prefers boldness to calculation while Sun Tzu favors calculated risks."<sup>9</sup> To Clausewitz, "a distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable," and he notes that boldness becomes increasingly rare the higher the rank.<sup>10</sup> Operational commanders must temper boldness and willingness to take risks with prudence to avoid recklessness. Risk-taking is an integral part of war, but recklessness endangers the very forces required to impose the operational commander's will upon the enemy.

### ***CHAPTER III***

#### **PENINSULA CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW**

After the Federal defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, Lincoln choose the thirty-four year old McClellan to command Union forces in the Washington area. A company grade officer of great promise, he found peacetime soldiering boring and resigned to successfully pursue a career in the railroad business. Appointed a regular major general at the outbreak of the war, his apparent successes in western Virginia prompted Lincoln to put him command of the Army of the Potomac. In November, McClellan replaced Winfield Scott as the General-in-Chief of the United States Army.

Dubbed "the Young Napoleon" by the press,<sup>11</sup> McClellan methodically set about organizing his army; "determined not to be hurried by public pressure into a premature advance before his army was completely equipped and thoroughly drilled."<sup>13</sup> Radical



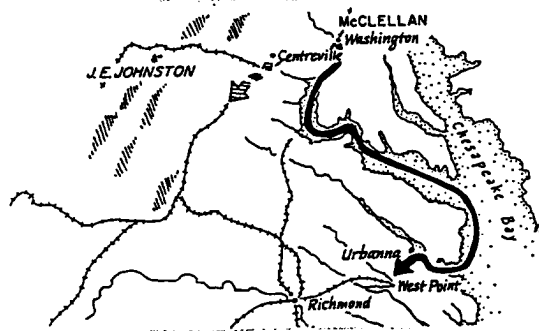
Figure 1. Eastern Virginia 1862<sup>12</sup>



Republicans, angered by the revelation that enemy deception caused McClellan to greatly overestimate the strength of Confederate fortifications in Fairfax and further enraged by the Ball's Bluff fiasco, pressured Lincoln in early 1862 to direct McClellan to advance against enemy forces in the Manassas/Centerville area. McClellan opposed that plan, as he did all of

Lincoln's proposals, and instead recommended an amphibious turning movement at Urbanna to get behind enemy forces in northern Virginia and threaten Richmond. An unexpected Confederate withdrawal southward rendered this plan impractical.

Figure 2. McClellan's Planned Turning Movement<sup>14</sup>



McClellan then proposed to land at Fort Monroe and move overland up the Peninsula, between the York and James Rivers, towards Richmond. Lincoln reluctantly approved, but only on the condition that a sizable force remain to protect Washington.<sup>15</sup> In March 1862, as McClellan prepared to move his forces to Fort Monroe, Lincoln unexpectedly relieved him temporarily as General-in-Chief to permit him to focus on the upcoming campaign. This well-meaning but clumsily implemented action- McClellan learned of it in a newspaper article- exacerbated already strained relations and poor communications.

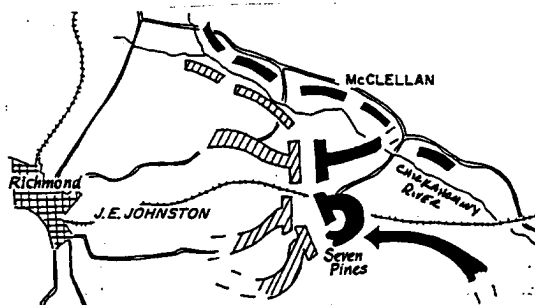
By early April, McClellan had most of his forces ashore and began moving towards Richmond. But Lincoln, concerned that there were not enough troops to protect Washington, delayed the deployment of McDowell's corps to the Peninsula. McClellan, already feeling outnumbered, pressed for the release of this corps. To divert forces from McClellan by exploiting Lincoln's sensitivity regarding Washington's security, Robert E. Lee, advisor to the Confederate President, directed "Stonewall" Jackson to conduct an offensive in the

Shenandoah Valley. By mid-June Jackson's success prevented the reinforcement of McClellan, who became even more convinced of his numerical inferiority.

McClellan moved slowly towards his first objective, Yorktown, and faced a weakly held line. Confederate deception again fooled McClellan concerning the actual strength of the fortifications and he halted to obtain siege artillery from Washington. Again, an unexpected enemy withdrawal surprised McClellan before he could bring his force to bear. Denied use of the upper James River due to strong enemy defenses, he established a base on the York River in the vicinity of West Point and was in sight of Richmond by 25 May. There he placed his army astride the Chickahominy River with three corps to the north and two to the south. He expected McDowell's corps to be released to march south to join him, with the linkup occurring northeast of Richmond.

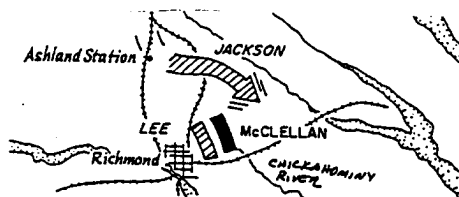
Johnston, the Confederate commander, sought to take advantage of McClellan's disposition by attacking the Union's isolated left flank south of the Chickahominy River. But Union forces repelled poorly coordinated Confederate assaults during the Battle of Seven Pines, 31 May to 1 June. By the end of this evenly fought battle, only one Union corps remained north of the river, Johnston had been seriously wounded, and McClellan learned that McDowell would not be joining him.

Figure 3. Stalemate at Seven Pines<sup>16</sup>



On 1 June, Lee assumed command of the Confederate forces. He was determined to eliminate the Federal threat to Richmond by defeating McClellan's army. He ordered Jackson leave the Shenandoah Valley and join him. His intended to fix in place the bulk of the enemy forces south of the Chickahominy River while he massed his forces to crush the lone Union corps to the north and then threaten McClellan's lines of communications.

Figure 4. Lee's Planned Turning Movement<sup>17</sup>



The Seven Days Battle, a series of sharp engagements, lasted from 25 June to 1 July. Neither side enjoyed a marked numerical superiority, though McClellan continued to think he was outnumbered. During the first three days, Lee's attempts to destroy the exposed Union corps were frustrated by piecemeal assaults and Jackson's uncharacteristic lethargy. Though several of McClellan's division commanders recommended a thrust towards Richmond through the Confederate weak right flank, he ordered his army to fall back towards a newly established base of operations on the James River to gain the protection of Union gunboats. Lee attempted to pursue, but a series of uncoordinated but successful independent delaying actions by Union corps commanders allowed the supply trains to escape. The Union forces then established strong defensive positions on Malvern Hill and shattered piecemeal Confederate assaults. Despite inflicting heavy casualties, McClellan ordered the rest of his army to move to the new base at Harrison's Landing. Following a stalemate there, Union forces subsequently withdrew by ship to Washington.

Figure 5. McClellan's Retreat<sup>18</sup>

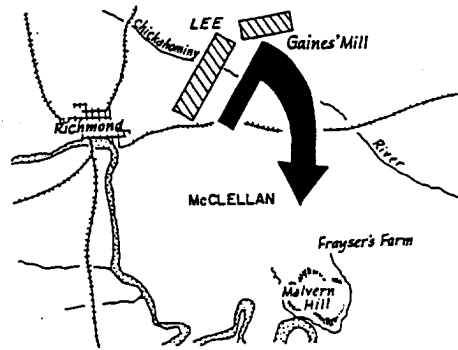


Figure 6. Lee's Planned Pursuit<sup>19</sup>

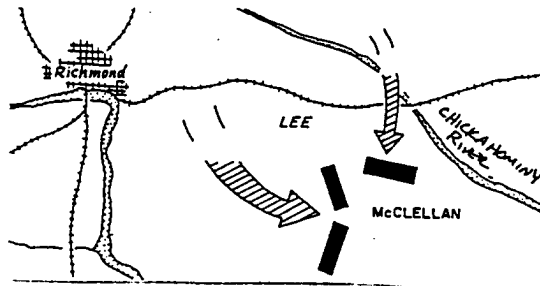


Figure 7. Engagement at Malvern Hill<sup>20</sup>

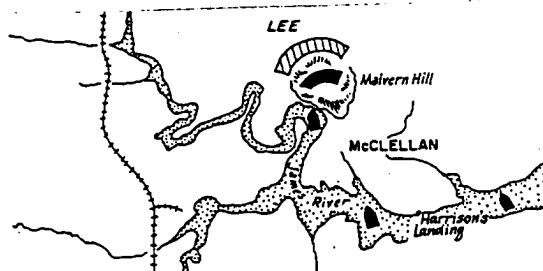


Figure 8. Stalemate at Harrison's Landing<sup>21</sup>



During the Seven Days Battle, Union forces consistently repulsed Confederate attacks, inflicting twice as many dead and wounded casualties as they suffered. Yet the Union army had been forced to withdraw from the outskirts Richmond to Harrison's Landing. Throughout the campaign, McClellan rarely ventured to the front, and never during the fighting. He kept in touch with his forces through couriers and telegraph. While the fighting was raging, he was often either supervising logistical operations or sending telegrams to Lincoln alternately proclaiming success or decrying a lack of support. He did not designate a subordinate commander to direct Union forces in his absence and as a result his corps commanders fought independently.

On 30 June, while his forces were withdrawing under heavy pressure towards Malvern Hill, McClellan was on a gunboat that was providing supporting fires. The next day, as his army prepared positions at Malvern Hill, he again boarded a gunboat, this time to go to Harrison's Landing to supervise the logistical buildup there. Though he returned before the fighting began, he remained several miles south of Malvern Hill while his forces inflicted horrible losses on the Confederates. Despite shattering enemy assaults at Malvern Hill, he ordered the continued withdrawal to Harrison's Landing.

#### ***CHAPTER IV***

#### **MCCLELLAN'S OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

McClellan has long been recognized for his excellent efforts to organize the Army of the Potomac, but his operational leadership is questioned. He and Lincoln did not have a close working relationship, though the President made every effort to develop one. But McClellan did not think much of his Commander-in-Chief; "he was not a man of very strong

character & as he was destitute of refinement-certainly in no sense a gentleman...”<sup>22</sup> This is a key point because “to McClellan gentlemanly virtues were important”<sup>23</sup> and thus he considered Lincoln to be his inferior. He felt the President manipulated by Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War who questioned McClellan’s views on slavery and willingness to fight.

The manifestation of McClellan’s smug sense of superiority was his reluctance to share his vision for future operations and his refusal to respond to questions or pressure. He had no feel for the political aspects of a democracy during wartime. To him, war was the sole domain of military professionals. McClellan resisted pressure to undertake offensive action in northern Virginia in the fall of 1861 because he did not understand, as Lincoln did, that a victory was necessary to sustain popular support.

The bitter argument over the number of troops left to protect Washington also reflected McClellan’s failure to appreciate political considerations and his reticence to discuss his plans with Lincoln. McClellan felt that even if the Confederates did threaten Washington while he was on the Peninsula, his proximity to Richmond and ability to disrupt enemy lines of communications would ensure that any such enemy action would be fleeting in nature because Johnston would be forced to move south against him. However, Lincoln knew that such an action would undermine public confidence in the government and even a temporary occupation of Washington could have significant foreign policy ramifications, possibly leading to European recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>24</sup> Lincoln constantly prodded McClellan during the campaign to move quickly against Richmond to obtain the incremental dividends that he needed to maintain his fragile Congressional support. McClellan’s responses were requests for reinforcements and complaints of lack of support.

McClellan's character was marked by an inflated ego and obstinacy. He truly felt that few were his equal and this bias influenced his decisions and relationships. His sense of superiority created a rigidity that was devoid of the judgment, flexibility, and tact needed for the compromises integral to the development of strategy in a democracy. The Urbanna turning movement and subsequent Peninsular Campaign were proposed to counter Lincoln's scheme of enveloping Confederate forces in northern Virginia because McClellan refused to consider the implementation of any scheme not his own. Once he had formed an opinion, he seldom budged from it.<sup>25</sup> His initial overestimates of the enemy's strength in late summer 1861 formed the basis for future intelligence estimates, regardless of any evidence to the contrary. He was convinced from the beginning that he was outnumbered and all his planning reflected that belief.

Courage, both moral and physical, is a key aspect of character. McClellan's unwillingness to accept responsibility and his eagerness to blame others for his failures suggest a lack of moral courage. His vacillation led to withdrawals after tactical successes. McClellan's absences from the front during the fighting and his forays on gunboats while his army was heavily engaged call into question his physical courage.

McClellan was unable to impose his will on the enemy or his subordinate commanders. An operational commander seeks to get inside the mind of his counterpart. But McClellan woefully misread the temper of his opponent, judging Lee to be "too cautious and weak under grave responsibility" and "likely to be timid and irresolute in action".<sup>26</sup> His ego led him to assume the enemy commander would do the same thing he would in a similar situation. Fear of being outnumbered and mirror imaging enemy intentions prevented him



from anticipating possible enemy courses of action and planning accordingly. Subordinate commanders were not aware of his intent, stifling initiative at the lower echelons.

McClellan's absence from the battlefield, infrequent contact with subordinate commanders, and attempts to centrally manage the battle from the rear paralyzed his army. There was no command structure in place to ensure the direction of the battle in his absence. Corps commanders fought poorly coordinated actions because he did not synchronize their efforts.

But perhaps McClellan's most serious flaw was his lack of boldness. His caution was based on a refusal to act until everything was perfect and a desire to win an objective by maneuver vice battle.<sup>27</sup> But continual overestimation of enemy capabilities ensured that the situation would never be to his liking. His apparent aversion to battle also stemmed from his regard for the lives of his men; "every poor fellow that is killed or wounded almost haunts me."<sup>28</sup> Clausewitz has harsh words for such commanders, "Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed...Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed..."<sup>29</sup> and "We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed."<sup>30</sup> McClellan seemingly forgot the reason for the Army of the Potomac's existence and was unwilling to risk its defeat.

McClellan consistently relinquished the initiative, despite numerous Confederate errors and Union tactical victories. This is particularly evident after the fighting at Gaines's Mill during the Seven Days Battle. After repulsing the enemy assaults, two of his division commanders urged him to penetrate the weak Confederate right flank and drive towards a virtually undefended Richmond. But Lee, correctly gauging that his opponent would not risk a threat to his lines of communication to exploit such an opportunity, massed his forces in an

attempt to destroy a portion of McClellan's army though the most direct way to Richmond was lightly defended. McClellan missed another opportunity to regain the offensive after Union guns had shredded enemy assaults at Malvern Hill. Because he was not at the front he did not have the situational awareness to recognize exploitable opportunities.

## ***CHAPTER V***

### **LESSONS FOR OPERATIONAL COMMANDERS**

McClellan's actions before and during the Peninsula Campaign offer several significant lessons for operational commanders. Political and military leaders must develop a working relationship to ensure that military operations focus on attaining strategic aims. Concerning campaign planning, the foremost lesson is the primacy of policy. The operational commander must understand the importance of incremental dividends to maintain public support for the war effort. McClellan's disdain for Lincoln and his belief that war and strategy were within the sole purview of the military precluded the inclusion of political needs in military operations and led to strained relations with Lincoln. It is the operational commander's responsibility to identify any strategy-resource mismatch and provide a risk assessment. But this assessment must be based on realistic evaluations of the enemy's capabilities and comparisons of relative combat power. McClellan's continual delusion about the superiority of Confederate manpower and martial prowess rendered his risk assessments invalid.

During the campaign, a critical responsibility of the operational commander is to ensure his intent is understood and followed. Clear articulation of the desired effects and a determination to overcome friction and obstacles are essential. An operational commander

must act resolutely to instill confidence in subordinates. Frequent personal contact with subordinate commanders and forces is a crucial means for imposing his will. McClellan infrequently saw his corps commanders and rarely ventured to the front. Consequently, there was uncertainty as to what he wanted to accomplish and no guidance that permitted his forces to do more than defend against Confederate attacks.

But perhaps the most important trait an operational commander must possess is boldness, tempered with prudence. As Clausewitz noted, “no other human activity (war) is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.”<sup>31</sup> Accepting risk to exploit unexpected opportunities or to create them is “the first prerequisite of the great military leader.”<sup>32</sup> McClellan refused to risk the defeat of his army and instead sought to advance methodically towards Richmond behind carefully prepared fortifications. In contrast, upon assuming command Lee immediately sought to gain the initiative with the intention of destroying McClellan’s army to prevent the capture of Richmond.

#### *CHAPTER IV*

#### **CONCLUSION**

Unfortunately for the Union, the Army of the Potomac was a potent warfighting instrument in the hands of a timid operational commander. McClellan was not fighting to win but rather not to lose. He had several opportunities to exploit Union tactical successes to capture Richmond and defeat of the Confederate army defending it. But his indecisiveness allowed Lee to push the Union army from the gates of Richmond despite winning only one of the major engagements.

Despite his failings, McClellan's experience provides valuable lessons. For operational commanders, McClellan's actions underline the primacy of policy in campaign planning, the criticality of the commander's intent, and the importance of maintaining situational awareness to exploit fleeting opportunities through bold action. For political leaders, the Lincoln-McClellan relationship highlights the necessity to ensure that the operational commanders they appoint are leaders of character, strong will, and boldness willing to be part of a civilian-military team focused on strategic objectives. The leadership of the operational commander is the key to the translation of military action into the attainment of strategic aims.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Howard and Peter Paret eds and trans, On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1976) 146.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>4</sup> Werner W. Banisch, "Leadership at the Operational Level," Army, August 1987, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," An Unpublished Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1996,1.

<sup>6</sup> Michael I. Handel, Masters of War: Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and Jomini (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD 1992), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Handel, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz, 191.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen W. Sears, George B. McClellan The Young Napoleon (New York: Ticknor & Fields 1988), 101.

<sup>12</sup> Howard M. Hensel, The Anatomy of Failure: The Case of Major General George B. McClellan and the Peninsular Campaign (Montgomery AL: Air Command and Staff College 1985), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Warren W. Hassler Jr., General George B. McClellan-Shield of the Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1957), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How The North Won: A Military History of the Civil War (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press 1983), 88.

<sup>15</sup> Hensel, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Hattaway, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>22</sup> Gabor S. Boritt, ed., Lincoln's Generals (New York: Oxford University Press 1994), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Hensel, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Boritt, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Steven E. Woodworth, Davis and Lee At War (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas 1995), 151.

<sup>27</sup> Hensel, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Sears, 198.

<sup>29</sup> Clausewitz, 75..

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 192.

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